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U.S. Group Reaches Deal to Provide Laptops to All Libyan Schoolchildren

By JOHN MARKOFF

SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 10 — The government of Libya reached an agreement on Tuesday with One Laptop Per Child, a nonprofit United States group developing an inexpensive, educational laptop computer, with the goal of supplying machines to all 1.2 million Libyan schoolchildren by June 2008.

The project, which is intended to supply computers broadly to children in developing nations, was conceived in 2005 by a computer researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Nicholas Negroponte. His goal is to design a wireless-connected laptop that will cost about $100 after the machines go into mass production next year.

William B. Plowman/Associated Press

Nicholas Negroponte wants to provide inexpensive laptops to children in developing nations.

To date, Mr. Negroponte, the brother of the United States intelligence director, John D. Negroponte, has reached tentative purchase agreements with Brazil, Argentina, Nigeria and Thailand, and has struck a manufacturing deal with Quanta Computer Inc., a Taiwanese computer maker.

Mr. Negroponte, who was in Tripoli this week to meet with Libyan officials, said he discussed the project extensively with the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, in August.

"When I met with Qaddafi, it had all the mystique and trimmings expected: middle of the desert, in a tent, 50 degrees C. etc.," Mr. Negroponte, who was traveling to Asia on Tuesday, wrote in an e-mail message. "It took him very little time to find O.L.P.C. appealing as an idea."

The idea appealed to the Libyan leader, according to Mr. Negroponte, because it fit into his political agenda of creating a more open Libya and becoming an African leader. The two men also discussed the possibility of Libya's financing the purchase of laptops for a group of poorer African nations like Chad, Niger and Rwanda.

It is possible, Mr. Negroponte said, that Libya will become the first nation in the world where all school-age children are connected to the Internet through educational computers. "The U.S. and Singapore are not even close," he said.

To date, One Laptop Per Child has received mixed support from the American computer industry. Test units currently use a low-power microprocessor manufactured by Advanced Micro Devices. However, both Intel and Microsoft have been publicly skeptical about the idea and have proposed competing low-cost educational computer projects. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, Bill Gates, Microsoft's chairman, suggested that the next generation of cellphones might be a better way to reach across the so-called digital divide.

One Laptop Per Child

Libya has ordered 1.2 million of the laptops being produced by One Laptop Per Child, wireless models that will cost about $100 each.

Mr. Negroponte said Microsoft refused to sell its Windows software to the project at a price that would make it possible to include in his system. As a result, his laptops will come with the freely available Linux operating system, which is becoming increasingly popular in the developing world.

The idea of a laptop for every schoolchild grew out of Mr. Negroponte's experience in giving children Internet-connected laptops in rural Cambodia. He said the first English word out of the mouths of the Cambodian students was "Google."

Discussions between the One Laptop project and the Libyan government began as part of work being done by the Monitor Group, an international consulting firm co-founded by the economist Michael E. Porter. It is now helping the Libyans develop a national economic plan.

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Libya have warmed recently, since Tripoli settled the Pan Am 103 bombing case and agreed to renounce its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Washington lifted a trade embargo two years ago, and the State Department rescinded Libya's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism last June.

For its $250 million investment, Libya will receive 1.2 million computers, one server per school, a team of technical advisers to help set up the system, satellite internet service and other infrastructure.

The first test models will be distributed to the five participating countries companies at the end of this November, according to Mr. Negroponte, and mass production is planned for June or July of 2007.

The computers come with a wireless connection, a built-in video camera, an eight-hour battery and a hand crank for recharging batteries. They will initially be priced below $150, and the price is expected to decline when they are manufactured in large numbers.